

EXTRACT

MY NOT SO PERFECT LIFE

by Sophie Kinsella

I'm not exaggerating. When I say Demeter has the perfect life, believe me, it's true. Everything you could want out of life, she has. Job, family, general coolness. Tick, tick, tick. Even her name. It's so distinctive, she doesn't need to bother with her surname (Farlowe). She's just Demeter. Like Madonna. 'Hi,' I'll hear her saying on the phone, in that confident, louder-than-average voice of hers. 'It's De-meeee-ter.'

She's forty-five and she's been Executive Creative Director at Cooper Clemmow for just over a year. Cooper Clemmow is a branding and strategy agency, and we have some pretty big clients – therefore Demeter's a pretty big deal. Her office is full of awards and framed photos of her with illustrious people, and displays of products she's helped to brand. She's tall and slim and has shiny brown hair and, as I already mentioned, amazing eyebrows. I don't know what she earns, but she lives in Shepherd's Bush in this stunning house which apparently she paid over two million for – my friend Flora told me.

Flora also told me that Demeter had her sitting-room floor imported from France and it's reclaimed oak parquet and cost a fortune. Flora's the closest in rank to me – she's a creative associate – and she's a constant source of gossip about Demeter.

I even went to look at Demeter's house once, not because I'm a sad stalker, but because I happened to be in the area and I knew the address, and, you know, why not check out your boss's house if you get the chance? (OK, full disclosure: I only knew the street name. I googled the number of the house when I got there.)

Of course, it's heartachingly tasteful. It looks like a house in a magazine. It is a house in a magazine. It's been profiled in Livingetc, with Demeter standing in her all-white kitchen, looking elegant and creative in a retro-print top.

I stood and stared at it for a while. Not exactly lusting – it was more wistful than that. Wisting. The front door is a gorgeous grey-green – Farrow & Ball or Little Greene, I'm sure – with an old-looking lion's head knocker and elegant pale grey stone steps leading up to it. The rest of the house is pretty impressive too – all painted window frames and slatted blinds and a glimpse of a wooden tree house in the back garden – but it was the front door that mesmerized me. And the steps. Imagine having a set of beautiful stone steps to descend every day, like a princess in a fairy tale. You'd start every day off feeling fabulous.

Two cars on the front forecourt. A grey Audi and a black Volvo people-carrier, all shiny and new. Everything Demeter has is either shiny and new and on-trend (designer juicing machine), or old and authentic and on-trend (huge antique wooden necklace that she got in South Africa). I think 'authentic' might be Demeter's favourite word in the whole world; she uses it about thirty times a day.

Demeter is married, of course, and she has two children, of course: a boy called Hal and a girl called Coco. She has zillions of friends she's known 'forever' and is always going to parties and events and design awards. Sometimes she'll sigh and say it's her third night out that week and exclaim, 'Glutton for punishment!' as she changes into her Miu Miu shoes. (I take quite a lot of her Net-A-Porter packaging to recycling for her, so I know what labels she wears. Miu Miu. Marni in the sale. Dries van Noten. Also quite a lot of Zara.) But then, as she's heading out, her eyes will start sparkling, and the next thing, the photos are all over Cooper Clemmow's Facebook page and Twitter account and everywhere: Demeter in a cool black top (probably Helmut Lang, she likes him too), holding a wine glass and beaming with famous designer types and being perfect.

And here's the thing: I'm not envious. Not exactly. I don't want to be Demeter. I don't want her things. I mean, I'm only twenty-six, what would I do with a Volvo people-carrier? But when I look at her, I feel this pinprick of – something, and I think: could that be me? Could that ever be me? When I've earned it, could I have Demeter's life? It's not just the things, but the confidence. The style. The sophistication. The connections. If it took me twenty years I wouldn't mind; in fact, I'd be ecstatic! If you told me: 'Guess what, if you work hard, in twenty years' time you'll be leading that life,' I'd put my head down right now and get to it.

It's impossible, though. It could never happen. People talk about 'ladders' and 'career structures' and 'rising through the ranks', but I can't see any ladder leading me to Demeter's life, however hard I work.

I mean, two million pounds for a house?

Two million?

I worked it out, once. Just suppose a bank ever lent me that kind of money – which they wouldn't – on my current salary it would take me 193.4 years to pay it off (and, you know, live).

When that number appeared on my calculator screen I actually laughed out loud a bit hysterically. People talk about the generation gap. Generation chasm, more like. Generation Grand Canyon. There isn't any ladder big enough to stretch from my place in life to Demeter's place in life, not without something extraordinary happening, like the lottery, or rich parents, or some genius website idea that makes my fortune. (Don't think I'm not trying. I spend every night attempting to

invent a new kind of bra, or low-calorie caramel. No joy yet.) So anyway. I can't aim for Demeter's life, not exactly. But I can aim for some of it. The achievable bits. I can watch her, study her. I can learn how to be like her.

And also, crucially, I can learn how to be not like her. Because, didn't I mention? She's a nightmare. She's perfect and she's a nightmare. Both.

I'm just powering up my computer when Demeter comes striding into our open-plan office, sipping her soy latte. 'People,' she says. 'People, listen up.'

This is another of Demeter's favourite words: 'people'. She comes into our space and says 'People' in that drama-school voice, and we all have to stop what we're doing as though there's going to be an important group announcement. When in fact what she wants is something very specific that only one person knows how to do, but since she can barely remember which of us does what, or even what our names are, she has to ask everyone.

All right, this is a slight exaggeration. But only slight. I've never met anyone as terrible at remembering names as Demeter. Flora told me once that Demeter actually has a real visual problem, some facial-recognition thing, but she won't admit it, because she reckons it doesn't affect her ability to do her job.

Well, newsflash: it does.

And second newsflash: what does facial recognition have to do with remembering a name properly? I've been here seven months, and I swear she's still not sure whether I'm Cath or Cat.

I'm Cat, in fact. Cat short for Catherine. Because . . . well. It's a cool nickname. It's short and punchy. It's modern. It's London. It's me. Cat. Cat Brenner.

Hi, I'm Cat.

Hi, I'm Catherine, but call me Cat.

OK, full disclosure: it's not absolutely me. Not yet. I'm still part Katie. I've been calling myself 'Cat' since I started this job, but for some reason it hasn't fully taken. Sometimes I don't respond as quickly as I should when people call out 'Cat'. I hesitate before I sign it, and one hideous time I had to scrub out a 'K' I'd started writing on one of those big office birthday cards. Luckily no one saw. I mean, who doesn't know their own name?

But I'm determined to be Cat. I will be Cat. It's my all-new London name. I've had three jobs in my life (OK, two were internships) and at each new step I've reinvented myself a bit more. Changing from Katie to Cat is just the latest stage. Katie is the home me. The Somerset me. A rosy-cheeked,

curly-haired country girl who lives in jeans and wellies and a fleece which came free with a delivery of sheep food. A girl whose entire social life is the local pub or maybe the Ritzy in Warreton. A girl I've left behind.

As long as I can remember, I've wanted out of Somerset. I've wanted London. I never had boy bands on my bedroom wall, I had the Tube map. Posters of the London Eye and the Gherkin.

The first internship I managed to scrape was in Birmingham, and that's a big city too. It's got the shops, the glamour, the buzz . . . but it's not London. It doesn't have that London-ness that makes my heart soar. The skyline. The history. Walking past Big Ben and hearing it chime, in real life. Standing in the same Tube stations that you've seen in a million films about the Blitz. Feeling that you're in one of the best cities in the world, no question, hands down. Living in London is like living in a movie set, from the Dickensian backstreets to the glinting tower blocks to the secret garden squares. You can be anyone you want to be.

There's not much in my life that would score in the top ten of any global survey. I don't have a top-ten job or wardrobe or flat. But I live in a top-ten city. Living in London is something that people all over the world would love to do, and now I'm here. And that's why I don't care if my commute is the journey from hell and my bedroom is about three feet square. I'm here.

I couldn't get here straight away. The only offer I had after uni was in a tiny marketing firm in Birmingham. So I moved up there and immediately started creating a new personality. I had a fringe cut. I started straightening my hair every day and putting it in a smart knot. I bought myself a pair of black glasses with clear lenses. I looked different. I felt different. I even started doing my make-up differently, with superdefined lipliner every day and black liquid eyeliner in flicky curves.

(It took me a whole weekend to learn how to do that flicky eyeliner. It's an actual skill, like trigonometry – so what I wonder is, why don't they teach that at school? If I ran the country there'd be GCSEs in things that you'd actually use your whole life. Like: How To Do Eyeliner. How To Fill In A Tax Return. What To Do When Your Loo Blocks And Your Dad Isn't Answering The Phone And You're About To Have A Party.)

It was in Birmingham that I decided to lose my West Country accent. I was in the loo, minding my own business, when I heard a couple of girls taking the piss out of me.

Farrmer Katie, they were calling me. And yes, I was shocked, and yes, it stung. I could have burst out of my cubicle and

exclaimed, ‘Well, I don’t think your Brummie accent’s any better!’

But I didn’t. I just sat there and thought hard. It was a reality check. By the time I got my second internship – the one in east London – I was a different person. I’d wised up. I didn’t look or sound like Katie Brenner from Ansters Farm. And now I’m totally Cat Brenner from London. Cat Brenner who works in a cool office with distressed-brick walls and white shiny desks and funky chairs and a coat stand in the shape of a naked man. (It gives everyone a real shock, the first time they come to visit.)

I mean, I am Cat. I will be. I just have to nail the not-signing-the-wrong-name thing.